DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 980 HE 035 412

TITLE	The Fundamentals of Accreditation: What Do You Need To Know?
INSTITUTION	Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-09-00
NOTE	16p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.chea.org/Research/docs%20for%20research/ Fund%20of%20Accred%2010-9-02.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Accreditation (Institutions); *Accrediting Agencies; *Colleges; *Higher Education

ABSTRACT

In a series of questions and answers, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation presents the fundamentals of the accreditation process and describes accrediting organizations. Accreditation is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. In the United States, accreditation is carried out by private, nonprofit organizations designed for this purpose. These organizations fall into the categories of regional accrediting organizations (there are six), national accreditation organizations that usually review entire institutions, and specialized accrediting organizations that review programs and some single-purpose institutions. The questions and answers describe the accreditation process, the "accrediting" of accrediting organizations themselves, the role of accreditation in distance education, and some aspects of accreditation that have important implications for the future. (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 469 980

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Eaton

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

THE Fundamentals of ACCREDITATION

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CHEA

September 2002

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity in the United States. CHEA represents more than 3,000 colleges and universities and 60 national, regional, and specialized accreditors.

© Copyright 2002
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Council for Higher Education Accreditation
One Dupont Circle NW • Suite 510
Washington DC 20036-1135
tel: 202-955-6126
fax: 202-955-6129
e-mail: chea@chea.org
www.chea.org

THE Fundamentals of ACCREDITATION

What Do You Need to Know?

Q&A

1. **Q. What is accreditation?**

   A. Accreditation is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement.

2. **Q. Who accredits institutions and programs?**

   A. In the U.S., accreditation is carried out by private, nonprofit organizations designed for this purpose.

3. **Q. Are there different types of accrediting organizations?**

   A. Yes, there are three:

   - Regional accrediting organizations operate in six different regions of the country and review entire institutions, 98 percent or more of which are both degree-granting and nonprofit. Regional organizations may also accredit non-degree, for-profit institutions, but this is a rare occurrence.

   - National accrediting organizations operate throughout the country and review entire institutions. Of the nationally accredited institutions, 34.8 percent are degree-granting and 65.1 percent are non-degree-granting. 20.4 percent are nonprofit and 79.5 percent are for-profit. Many are single purpose institutions focused on a specific mission such as education in information technology or business. Some are faith based.

   - Specialized accrediting organizations also operate throughout the country and review programs and some single-purpose institutions. There are more than 17,600 of these accredited programs and single-purpose operations.*

** Council for Higher Education Accreditation: Internal Data, September 2001*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

4. **Q. How does the accreditation process work?**

A. Accreditation review is ongoing. The initial earning of accreditation is not entry to indefinite accredited status. The five key features of accreditation are:

- Self study: Institutions and programs prepare a written summary of performance based on accrediting organization's standards.
- Peer review: Accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty, administrators, and members of the public.
- Site visit: Accrediting organization normally sends a visiting team to review an institution or program. Team members are volunteers.
- Action (judgment) of accrediting organization: Accrediting organization has commission that makes decisions about the accredited status of institutions and programs.
- Monitoring and oversight: Institutions and programs are reviewed over time in cycles from every few years to ten years. Normally, these reviews include a site visit.

5. **Q. Who "recognizes" or accredits the accrediting organizations?**

A. The United States Department of Education (USDE) and a private organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), both "recognize" accrediting organizations. The USDE process is governed by federal law and regulations. The CHEA process is private and is governed by policies adopted by a 17-member board of directors.

"Recognition" means that the accrediting organizations undergo a review of their qualifications and activities to determine whether they meet the

standards of USDE or CHEA. If accreditors meet the standards, they are recognized.

6. **Q. Besides one being federal and one private, what's the difference between the two?**

   A. Both USDE and CHEA review the effectiveness of accrediting organizations. USDE's primary purpose is to assure that federal student aid funds are purchasing quality courses and programs. USDE's recognition is based on ten standards that include attention to recruitment and admission practices, fiscal and administrative capacity and facilities, and success with respect to student achievement. Only those institutions that are accredited by a USDE-recognized accrediting organization are eligible to receive federal financial assistance for their students.

   CHEA's primary purpose is to assure and strengthen academic quality and ongoing quality improvement in courses, programs, and degrees. CHEA recognition is based on five standards that include advancing academic quality and encouraging needed improvement. In order to be considered for CHEA recognition, more than 50 percent of the institutions or programs reviewed by an accrediting organization must be degree-granting.

7. **Q. Why bother with CHEA recognition?**

   A. CHEA recognition confers an academic legitimacy on accrediting organizations, helping to solidify the place of these organizations and their institutions and programs in the national higher education community.

8. **Q. How often are organizations required to go through recognition?**

   A. Federal law stipulates that the maximum for which an organization can receive recognition is five years. For new accrediting organizations, the maximum is two years. Organizations are also subject to ongoing moni-

toring and oversight through information that is required by USDE. For example, organizations are required to submit an annual report, an annually updated list of accredited and preaccredited institutions and programs, a summary of the organization's major accrediting activities during the previous year if requested by the Secretary, any proposed change in the organization's policies, procedures, or standards that might alter its scope of recognition or compliance with the criteria for recognition, and the name of any institution or program it accredits that the organization believes is failing to meet its program responsibilities under Title IV (Student Assistance) of the Higher Education Act (HEA), or is engaged in fraud or abuse.

CHEA policy states that the maximum recognition period is ten years with a mandatory five-year interim report. In addition, CHEA reserves the right to review an organization if the accreditor makes major changes in how it operates or if there are a series of documented concerns about the organization.

9. **Q. Critics of accreditation say it's just a back-scratching exercise and anybody who wants to can get accredited. Is this true?**

A. No. Accreditation involves a great deal of work on the part of the institution or program under review as well as the accrediting organization.

- Self studies require extensive documentation and evidence of quality of an institution or program.
- Accreditation teams test the veracity of the self study and look for areas that require improvement that may have been missed.
- Representatives of institutions or programs are carefully interviewed by accrediting commissions to ensure that any concerns that have surfaced will be addressed.

- Peers have a responsibility to the entire higher education community and closer to home; they do not seek to undermine the perceived quality of their own institutions or programs by recommending accreditation for "anyone who wants to get accredited."

10. Q. **If an institution or program says that it is accredited, but the accrediting organization is not recognized by either USDE or CHEA, is it a bad accrediting organization?**

    A. If an institution or program is not accredited by a recognized accrediting organization, it means we probably lack needed information about the institution's or program's quality and the quality of the accrediting organization. We don't know if the organization is good or bad. However, there are exceptions. Some institutions and programs are accredited by organizations that are not recognized by USDE or CHEA for reasons that do not relate to quality.

    For example, after passage of the Higher Education Amendments of 1992, the USDE interpreted the statute and issued regulations to require USDE recognition of only those accrediting organizations where institutions or programs are seeking eligibility for certain federal financial aid and other federal programs. Thus, a number of formerly recognized accrediting organizations were no longer recognized by USDE.

11. Q. **What if an institution or program is not accredited? Does that mean it's bad?**

    A. Not necessarily, but it does mean one should review as much information as possible about the institution before enrollment. An institution or program may be new and may not have met minimum standards to even be considered eligible for accreditation. If an institution or program is not accredited, it should have some other means of quality review.

12. Q. **Some argue that accreditation and access to Title IV student financial assistance should not be linked. Are they linked?**

A. Although accreditation is a nongovernmental activity, it is used by the government as one of the tools to help protect the federal investment in institutions and ensures students and parents that basic standards of quality are being met.

- The federal government has relied on accreditation since 1952 with the reauthorization of the GI Bill for Korean War veterans. After the first GI Bill, a number of new institutions were established and there were some doubts as to the quality of these institutions. Rather than reinvent the wheel, the federal government decided to rely on accreditation to determine academic quality.

- One of the ten standards required in USDE recognition requires accrediting organizations to ensure compliance with program responsibilities for Title IV, student financial assistance. If an institution is fiscally unstable, it cannot meet its goals with respect to mission or serve students well.

13. Q. **A recent study released by USDE, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge, The Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality* (2002), indicated that schools of education in this country are in need of a serious overhaul. Does accreditation fit into this picture, if so, how?**

A. Accreditation alone does not guarantee student achievement, but when student achievement is lacking, accreditation can and should be part of the solution. Teacher education accrediting organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council are working with their schools of education where graduates may be doing poorly to raise student achievement. This effort requires assistance from the institutions in which

schools of education reside to address curriculum requirements and academic standards. It also requires assistance from states through their role in setting licensure requirements.

14. Q. How should accreditation be strengthened to better protect students and the public?

A. One answer is to ask accrediting organizations, institutions, and programs to provide more detailed information about their effectiveness. Institutions already provide a great deal of information that is readily available on their Websites or in their student handbooks. Students and the public can benefit from more readily available information about just what accredited status means for a particular institution or program.

15. Q. If you attend a nationally accredited institution, can you transfer and get your credits accepted from a regionally accredited school?

A. Yes, but not all of the time. Decisions about transfer of credit are made at the local level by colleges and universities. Sometimes there is not an adequate fit in curriculum or standards between two schools and credits will not transfer. Although some have suggested that transfer of credit be mandated by the federal government, most people prefer local control of higher education just as we have local control of elementary and secondary education.

Because of the array of issues surrounding transfer of credit, CHEA has been actively involved since 1998 in getting to the root problems and suggesting solutions. Prompted by concern that accredited status of a program or institution assist, not hinder, students in the transfer process, CHEA published *A Statement to the Community: Transfer and the Public Interest* in November 2000.

CHEA has also worked closely with the 19 recognized institutional accrediting organizations—regional and national—to identify key responsibilities that accrediting organizations and institutions are asked to consider if the CHEA Statement is to be used effectively. Both documents are available on the CHEA Website, www.chea.org.

16. Q. **What about distance learning and accreditation? How can we be sure that programs offered through distance learning are quality offerings?**

A. Standards, guidelines, and polices to determine academic quality are in place for the scrutiny of distance learning. The 17 institutional accrediting organizations that review institutions offering distance learning programs or courses actively apply these standards or guidelines in their review. Where appropriate, accrediting organizations modified and expanded practices to address unique features of distance learning.

17. Q. **Shouldn't there be a separate standard in the law to review distance learning?**

A. Right now, institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations are effectively reviewing distance learning within the framework of the agreement reached with USDE and the Congress during the 1998 reauthorization: distance learning is considered part of the scope of accrediting organizations if they had been reviewing distance learning prior to 1998. At this time, there does not appear to be a need for a separate standard.

However, as new types of education offerings—e.g., online non-degree options from providers that are not affiliated with any accredited entity—become more and more available, accrediting organizations may need to consider whether they should be examining the quality of these offerings as well. And, this may involve consideration of a separate standard.

18. Q. **In this era of accountability, how can the concept of self-regulation work? How can we be sure higher education will remain the envy of the world?**

A. Key to meeting accountability expectations of the public and government is accreditation's capacity to provide reliable information about institution and program performance and student learning outcomes. Many of the recent reforms undertaken by accrediting organizations have led to standards and policies calling for developing and using evidence of how well institutions and programs perform and students learn when making judgments about accredited status.

The self-regulatory process of accreditation works. It has helped to create a higher education system that is the most diverse, highest quality, yet, most accessible in the world. Self-regulation assures self-responsibility, builds pride, and has been instrumental in creating the unparalleled intellectual accomplishment of our society.

19. Q. **There has been a great deal of attention lately paid to outcomes as evidence of student learning. In K-12, children will have to get tested annually—what is higher education doing about student learning outcomes?**

A. Accreditors are keenly aware of the heightened emphasis that is being placed on student learning outcomes. Governments, students, and the public all want evidence of student learning outcomes in quality reviews of institutions. With that said, the measures and the lexicon we use with respect to student learning outcomes are as diverse as the topic.

CHEA has focused its attention on student learning outcomes. In September 2001, CHEA published *Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes: A Point of Departure* by Peter Ewell, vice president of the

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). In addition, CHEA is hosting workshops across the country to assist accreditation organizations in their work on student learning outcomes.

20. Q. **Where can I go to get more information about accreditation?**

A. The CHEA Website, www.chea.org, has a great deal of general information on accreditation, including the latest research and information on the CHEA recognition process. In addition, the USDE Website, www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/index.html also has information on accreditation and the federal recognition process.

How to get in touch with CHEA:

Council for Higher Education Accreditation
One Dupont Circle NW • Suite 510
Washington DC 20036-1135
tel: 202-955-6126 • fax: 202-955-6129
e-mail: chea@chea.org • *www.chea.org*

CHEA

One Dupont Circle NW • Suite 510
Washington DC 20036-1135
tel: 202-955-6126 • fax: 202-955-6129
e-mail: chea@chea.org • *www.chea.org*

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").